

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Pentecost 14  
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Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz  
***The church expects a heavy burden***

—Matthew 16:21-26

I want you to put yourself into the shoes of Jesus' first followers for a moment. Think: Mary Magdalene; Peter, Andrew, James, John; Matthew the tax collector; Simon the Zealot. What was it about Jesus of Nazareth that attracted people to him? Isn't it surprising that men who were successful businessmen left everything to follow Jesus around the countryside? What was so attractive about this Nazarene fellow called Jesus that thousands of people would gather to hear him speak? Was it his charisma? His directness—his ability to call things like they really were? And these thousands of people would travel *en masse* back and forth around the Sea of Galilee trying to catch up with Jesus. Was it just miracles they wanted to see, a show they were after—miracles and full bellies? And when Jesus appoints the twelve and designates them "apostles," and sends them out to preach the good news of the kingdom of God, what did they think they had signed up for? What did they think they were going to get out of the deal?

It's not unheard of for a charismatic speaker to draw large crowds; that's happened many times throughout history. Some cult leaders have even performed "miracles" using illusion or parlor tricks or real supernatural feats by the power of Satan, not the power of God. But all these charlatans attracted people by promising them something—paradise on earth, Shangri-La, Xanadu, Deseret, relief from their problems, a better, prosperous life.

When the disciples heard Jesus' call, "Follow me!" and left everything and followed Jesus, they might have been expecting something similar. Everyone was waiting for the Messiah, the Christ, and this Jesus matched all the expected signs. He fulfilled all the prophecies, fit all the descriptions, checked all the boxes. When Jesus asked, "Who do you say I am?" Peter stepped right up and replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" Who wouldn't want to be close to the Messiah? Who wouldn't want a seat right next to unlimited power? Who wouldn't want to bask in the glory of the Son of God? Following Jesus meant glory, prestige, honor, earthly wealth, the good life! And when Jesus finally went to Jerusalem to unmask his true identity and establish the kingdom of God on earth, the disciples expected that great things would happen, and they would be right there in on the action.

But then things took a very different turn, altogether different from what the disciples were expecting. *From that time on Jesus began to show his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law, and be killed, and on the third day be raised again.* We're going to Jerusalem, all right, but it's not to take control of the government. It's to suffer and die and rise again. The disciples were shocked! It wasn't supposed to be this way with Jesus! This wasn't what they had signed up for when they followed him. So Peter was going to make sure his Master would stay safe. *Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "May you receive mercy, Lord! This will never happen to you."* I'm sure Peter had good intentions. He was trying to express his loyalty to Jesus. Given the fact that later, on the night Jesus was betrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, it was Peter who whipped out his sword, starting swinging and actually lopped off someone's ear, Peter may have been trying to say, "We're not going to let happen what you say is going to happen, Jesus. We will protect you and keep you safe from those evil elders, chief priests, and experts in the law."

Peter's foolish words earned him a rebuke from Jesus. *But Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a snare to me because you are not thinking the things of God, but the things of men."* Well-intentioned Peter was speaking against and undermining the whole reason Jesus the Christ had come. In trying to turn Jesus away from the cross, Peter was acting like Satan himself! The whole reason Jesus had come was to save sinners from hell, and to save sinners from hell Jesus had to suffer hell in our place. Jesus had to take on himself all the wrath of God that we and the world by our sins have deserved, and he had to step in as our substitute and die our death. Peter was not going to dissuade Jesus from carrying out his mission to save the world from eternal damnation. "Get behind me, Satan!" was Jesus' response to Peter's naïve and foolish words. They would go to Jerusalem. Jesus would be betrayed. Jesus would be mercilessly mocked, spit upon and flogged. Jesus would be nailed to a cross, and he would pour out his blood for Peter and the rest of the glory-seeking disciples, and for you and for me. And by his suffering, death and resurrection on the third day, Jesus would justify—declare "not-guilty"—an entire world of guilty people. Because only in Jesus' blood, and only in Jesus' life, death and resurrection, can guilty sinners find forgiveness. Only in Jesus' cross of shame and suffering, damnation and death, can redeemed sinners find glory and eternal life.

But Jesus takes it one step further. Regardless of whatever reason the disciples had when they followed Jesus, regardless of whatever they thought they were going to get out of the deal, it was time for Jesus to set the record straight. *Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. In fact, whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.* You disciples thought you were following me to earthly glory, power, and prestige? No! If you want to be called my follower,

it's going to be difficult. The church of Jesus Christ expects a heavy burden, because followers of Jesus are called to carry the cross of discipleship.

So . . . why do you follow Jesus? What were you called to when God placed his Name upon you at your baptism? What did you sign up for when you pledged to remain faithful to Jesus at your confirmation? What do you expect from Jesus? What do you expect that being a Christian will do for you?

A lot of people today peddle the notion that being a Christian is a fast pass to the good life. If you're a Christian, your troubles will go away. Your difficulties will disappear. Being a Christian means prosperity, health, happiness, worldly wealth, problems that just go away with a quick prayer and—poof!—your life will be fine and dandy again. That's a lie! That might be the church we want, but it's not the church God wants. That's not what Jesus promised; it's not how he said things would be. Jesus never promised a life of ease. He never said you and I would be carried through life and into the Promised Land on a bed of roses. People have come out and said, "I thought when I became a Christian my life would be easier. Instead it got harder." Yeah! That *is* what Jesus said would happen. Unfortunately, if people are expecting Jesus to hand them the good life, when they face sickness or poverty or loss, they become disenchanted and frustrated with Christianity. They expected something different, even though Jesus never said we would have it easy in this life. So people leave Jesus and turn away and go looking somewhere else for the good life they're after.

The true Church, the Church that is truly built on Christ the solid Rock, expects to carry a heaven burden. "In this world you are going to have trouble," Jesus said, 'but be courageous! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). You are a Christian, and so you can expect to have to carry a cross of hardship and difficulty through this life. If you don't want the cross, don't pretend to follow Jesus; we can't have it both ways. But a cross isn't just any old hardship or difficulty in life; everyone has those in this evil world, whether they follow Jesus or not. No, a cross of discipleship is a hardship or difficulty that we face just because we are Christians.

Think about some of the heavy burdens that you carry just because you are a follower of Jesus. There are moral issues that trouble us but might cause no heartburn to others. The culture falls in love with abortion, transgenderism, flagrant immorality—these things are like a dagger in my heart; they trouble me greatly. For other people they're no problem—even celebrated! ("Look at how free and enlightened and unshackled from oppression we are that we can do anything we want—even the most gross, disgusting, and immoral things.") This is celebrated as a win for society, but for us, it's a heavy cross to bear.

We want our children to grow up and walk with Jesus, and we want to be in heaven with them someday. There are few things that weigh more heavily on Christian parents than when their children stray from their Savior. For other people that's not a big deal. ("Let them go their own way, find their own path.") For Christian parents this is a heavy cross to bear.

Our own temptations and sins cause us to struggle. We wrestle with our own sinful nature. Why did I say that? Why did I act that way? Why did I let temptation get the better of me? Why is it so hard to get my thoughts to line up with the way Jesus thinks? That ongoing battle with temptation and sin creates a struggle unique to followers of Jesus. Other people don't worry about such things. ("You just live your life. If it feels good, go for it. You do you, and let the chips fall where they may.")

That's what you signed up for when you became a follower of Jesus. Discipleship comes with a heavy cross that others in the world don't have to bear.

But here's the thing. . . and this is a big "but" . . . the heavy cross that we bear as Christians is a cross we bear joyfully! When we are obedient to Jesus Christ, we give thanks for the privilege, even if it's hard. I think of the disciples in Acts 5 who spoke boldly about Jesus, and after the Jewish leaders had threatened them and had them beaten, the disciples rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for the Name of Jesus. So your life is tough because you're a Christian. You carry extra burdens because you're a Christian. Praise God! The most important thing is: You're a Christian! The Church of God doesn't go around with long faces, moaning and complaining about how hard things are. No, we bear Jesus' cross joyfully!

And there is something we have to look forward to. No, it's not earthly glory, power, wealth, or prestige in this life. Those things are temporary and so fleeting. Jesus puts it into perspective: *After all, what will it benefit a person if he gains the whole world but forfeits his soul? Or what can a person give in exchange for his soul?* So you've got all the money in the world, you drive a nice car, have a great job, and live in a nice house, and people think you're popular and cool—but at the end of your life, when you're judged Jesus says, "I don't know you," and you're thrown into outer darkness and eternal fire? You lose your soul and the promise of eternal life because of some trivial, temporary, earthly stuff? Really? That's not a win!

No, here in this life we bear a cross for Jesus, but we wait for a crown of glory. In this life we expect a heavy burden, but we experience the joy of cross-bearing, the joy of sacrificing, the joy of serving with our eyes on the prize, the prize of heaven. It's not our crosses that we carry that get us into heaven. It's Jesus' cross that gets us into heaven. His blood has washed us clean, his forgiveness has removed our guilt, his perfection has become the glorious garment

that we wear in him. We consider a privilege to take up our cross and follow him, and to each of us he says, "Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). Amen.